

Jacob A. Riis

A SKETCH OF
HIS LIFE
AND WORK



WITH PORTRAIT



The Macmillan Company
66 Fifth Avenue, New York



MR. JACOB A. RIIS

Jacob A. Riis

A SKETCH OF
HIS LIFE
AND WORK



WITH PORTRAIT



The Macmillan Company
66 Fifth Avenue, New York

JACOB A. RIIS

A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND WORK.

MR. JACOB A. RIIS, the author of *The Making of an American*, *The Battle with the Slum*, *How the Other Half Lives*, and *Children of the Tenements*, was born in 1849 at the town of Ribe on the Northeast coast of Denmark. His boyhood and youth, of which he writes with the most genuine charm in the early portion of *The Making of an American*, were spent in his native town, except for four years when he was in Copenhagen learning his trade as a builder's apprentice. But all this time he loved his boyhood's sweetheart; and when her parents decided that a common carpenter would not do for their beautiful daughter, he went out into the world to seek his fortune. It was on Whit-Sunday, 1870, that the Glasgow steamer landed Mr. Riis

in New York, " with a pair of strong hands and stubbornness enough to do for two." Thereafter he plunged into any kind of work which he could get to do, at one time toiling among a settlement of honest Welshmen in the back hills, later in a coal mine, again for a truck-farmer, still later in a brick yard, always hunting for some steady employment that would give him a living and a future. It was a long road indeed before he learned to make his way against the current and really began life as a newspaper man. He made a success of his newspaper, and returned to Denmark for his sweetheart; but it was not for some months after his marriage that he really began the work of his life as a reporter at police headquarters on Mulberry street.

Attending to the work of his office was all that he could possibly do at first; but in the end his work found him out, and he plunged with heart and soul into a fight of his own making against the slum and all that it stood for. But it was up-hill work. Mr. Riis seems to have the knack of falling into fights and of pulling them

through and of getting into another fight in consequence and of pulling that through. His fight single-handed against the politicians on the one hand and the landlords on the other, backed by all the power of habit and selfishness and graft, was from the start almost hopelessly desperate, and also the bravest that could be imagined; but he stuck to it until he won. Everybody in the world was against him, it seemed, until Roosevelt came to be Police Commissioner; after that things went more to his liking, until he had utterly wiped out a dozen blocks of the worst tenements in the city. The story, as recorded in *The Making of an American*, is certainly one of the most affecting things in recent literature: an amazing revelation of the amount of good which a determined man, though a foreigner and friendless, can accomplish single-handed against the whole inertia of a huge metropolis.

Meanwhile his fame had gone abroad; and when he had come to a position where his work was beginning to tell, his pen became busier than ever answering requests from magazines for arti-

cles and stories of the slum. Also, he became a lecturer. It was always the same fight—the fight for decency and good order in the slum, and a chance for the children, and the destruction of the rookeries, and the creation of small parks. “That which I have described as ‘sitting up with a club’ in a city like New York is bound to win your fight if you sit up long enough, for it is to be remembered that the politicians who oppose good government are not primarily concerned about keeping you out of your rights. They want the things that make for their advantage; first of all the offices through which they can maintain their grip. After that they will concede as many of the things you want as they have to, and if you are not yourself out for the offices, more than otherwise, though never more than you wring out of them. They really do not care if you do have clean streets, good schools, parks, playgrounds, and all the things which make for good citizenship because they give the best part of the man a chance, though they grudge them as a sad waste of money that might be turned

to use in 'strengthening the organization,' which is the sum of all their self-seeking, being their means of ever getting more and more. Hence it is that a mere handful of men and women who rarely or never had other authority than their own unselfish purpose, have in all times, even the worst, been able to put their stamp upon the community for good."

He plunged waist deep into every thing that was worth while, every movement for law and order and decency and right and freedom and better civilization. But through it all he had a great deal of fun, besides doing an immense amount of good; and that is one reason why his book, *The Making of an American*, published two years ago, is still one of the most popular books in the United States. Much of it, though happy and gay, is more deeply and genuinely affecting than the saddest fiction ever written; and from beginning to end it tells the story of one of the bravest fights against all kinds of obstacles that has ever been waged. The book abounds, too, in good stories, such as the famous one about the firemen

who, wishing to honor the memory of the dead reporter, but being obliged through press of time to leave it to the florist, found themselves on the solemn occasion face to face with a huge wreath bearing the legend "Admit within Fire Lines Only." "We will strive together for all that is noble and good" has been the text of Mr. Riis's whole life; and he sums up his career in the two simple sentences: "I have been very happy. No man ever had so good a time." And the book is all written with the vigor and the almost riotous zest in living and doing which has been Mr. Riis's driving power throughout his notable career.

To-day he is one of the best known authors and also one of the most popular lecturers in the United States, but he is something more than that—he is a power for good. He has plunged into everything worth while that came his way, and by sheer force of his personality has made himself felt wherever there was good to be done. Absolutely his sole power or backing, absolutely his only point of appeal, at the beginning, lay in the fact that he was right and that nearly every-

body else was wrong or indifferent. He stuck to it until he won, and his life and his story of it contain the greatest moral lesson of recent years to every young man and woman in this land, whether of American or of foreign birth. Withal his book is alive with interest and variety, and human nature and humanity and emotion, and the sense of struggle and power and accomplishment; and it is not surprising that *The Making of an American* appears every week in the lists of the half-dozen books most in demand by the readers in the public libraries of our great cities. It is one of the most genuine books ever written, and one of the truest to the strong and the fine things in human nature. It is fully illustrated throughout with pictures showing every step in the progress of Mr. Riis's life and work.

Mr. Lincoln Steffens recently wrote for McClure's Magazine an article on the reformer from which the following significant extracts are taken:

If any rich man could mark a city with as many good works as Jacob A. Riis has thrust upon New York, his name would be called good and

boys who play hooky are punished—they used to be imprisoned with juvenile criminals. Riis did the work that won small parks for bad spots in the city; he labored years for enough schools; he himself great; no matter how he made his money, the man would be a philanthropist. Riis is a reporter. The evils he exposed he discovered as a reporter; as a reporter he wrung men's hearts with them; and the reporter with his "roasts" compelled indifferent city officials to concede the reforms he suggested or approved. Consider these reforms: It was Riis who exposed the contaminated state of the city's water supply, and thus brought about the purchase of the whole Croton watershed. It was Riis who forced the destruction of rear tenements, and thus relieved the hideous darkness and density of life among the poor. It was the reporter with his nagging that wiped out Mulberry Bend, the worst tenement block in the city, and had the space turned into a park. Riis spoke the word that incited Commissioner Roosevelt to abolish police station lodging-houses. Riis fought for and secured a truant school, where

drove bakeshops with their fatal fires out of tenement basements; he demanded light for dark tenement hallways, got it, and thus opened one hiding-place of vice, crime, and filth. He worked for the abolition of child labor, and, when a law was enacted, compelled its enforcement. Playgrounds for schools and the opening of school-rooms to boys' and girls' clubs were of his work. And he raised the cry for flowers for the healthy as well as the sick poor.

AN EXPENSIVE REFORMER

Of course he did not do all these things single-handed, and he did not pay for them out of his own pocket. Riis was poor in pocket, but he was rich in sentiment and strength and courage. He gave facts and made the city pay. The man has cost New York city millions of dollars. According to the latest principle of public benefaction, however, this makes him all the more a philanthropist, for such men as Rockefeller and Carnegie have been giving money only on condition that the city or institution receiving the gifts

should raise as much more, and Mr. Carnegie told me once that he was prouder of what he had made the cities do for themselves than of all that he himself had given. So Riis, who has made his city foot the whole bill, is the greatest philanthropist of them all.

Riis is a lusty Danish emigrant, with a vigorous body, an undisciplined mind that grasps facts as he himself sees them, an imagination to reconstruct, emotion to suffer, and a kind, fighting spirit, to weep, whoop, laugh, and demand. As a reporter he saw straight, told about it in words hot with emotion, and, because his feeling was genuine, he was not content with the pleasant sensation of horror he gave his readers, neither could he be ordered off on some other assignment; he turned reformer, and while the man continued to pity, the reporter continued to report, and the reformer worked through despair to set the wrong right. As a citizen, public business came first in his interest, his own second.

The power to condone evil in its vicious form failed Riis always. He has a brilliant imagina-

tion. He has gathered with the cleverest reporters in New York the facts of a news story, and, by grasping them with his sympathy and imagination, has so written them that his paper appeared to have a "beat." His imagination was that of a child or a genius. If this hadn't been so he never would have done his great work—indeed, his power has all come out of his imagination and feeling. Far deeper than any intellectual faculty lay his sympathy. His life, as you can see in "The Making of an American," has been one long stretch of emotional excitement. The world has played upon his sensibilities as it does upon the soul of a musician, and since his feelings found no expression in art, they went off, not, as with most men of his temperament, in weird dissipations or lay sermons, but in action.

THE METHODS OF THE MAN

Now how did Riis win these victories? An effective reformer is so rare that he should be accounted for; a bold exposition of the methods by which an obscure reporter wrought so many re-

forms might make useful some of the well-meaning meddlers who never get anywhere. I fear not, however. Riis was simply a good citizen; the big, jolly, sentimental Dane took his adopted citizenship literally, and literally "worked for the public good"—"worked" like a political rascal. His methods were much like those of a boss. In the first place he kept himself in the background, sought no office, indulged no vanity and no self-glorification. In the second place he worked all the time. "The churches may close, the saloons and the slums are open all day and all night, all the year round," he said once to me. In the third place he played upon men, used them, and women, too, and while he preached he pulled wires. In the fourth place he waited to strike when the right iron turned up hot.

"CHILDREN OF THE TENEMENTS."

"I never could fake anything; I have sometimes wished I could," remarked Mr. Riis the other day in conversation. He was speaking about

his new book of short stories, *Children of the Tenements*, which The Macmillan Company publishes this fall; and he went on to say that every incident related in the book as fiction actually happened within his own knowledge. Incidents have been grouped together which did not happen consecutively; but every incident and scene has actually happened in the way set forth. Some things can be told a great deal better in fiction than through any other medium; and this large volume presents the most complete and the truest and the most varied picture of the New York slums which has ever been created. The fact that the poorer people are, the more kind and charitable and generous they are to each other, has never been more strongly brought out.

The people of the tenements as they are in their everyday lives, and in their holiday seasons, too, become living, breathing human beings to the reader of this book, who finds himself entering into their joys and sufferings, their hard work and their play and their deprivations, and learning to know them as human beings with all the

traits and wishes and qualities and hopes that the rest of us have. For a quarter of a century Mr. Riis has been better acquainted with the New York tenement house region than anyone else who could write, and his new volume portrays with wonderful skill and unfailing sympathy and love the significant and interesting people who live in that quarter of the Metropolis. Three or four of these are Christmas stories, and all have to do with the children, young or old, of the tenements. The book is brought fittingly to a close by an article entitled "Making a Way Out of the Slum." Some of these stories are merry and lighthearted as the children themselves; others are powerful or tragic, two or three are gloomy, and still others are whimsical.

The volume is illustrated with a number of excellent pictures by Mr. C. M. Relyea and others who have made a special study of tenement house life, and the publishers have given it an attractive dress. It rounds out and completes the story of what Mr. Riis has seen and contended with in the long "Battle with the Slum."

By Mr. JACOB A. RIIS

The Making of an American

Ninth Edition

Profusely illustrated, \$2.00 net.

"It is to be doubted if a more entertaining autobiography was ever written than this story of the life of the author of *How the Other Half Lives*. . . . To the men and women who are in the midst of the struggle for existence, it brings a message of hopefulness from one who accomplished everything that stands to-day to his credit simply by his own pluck and perseverance."—*The Tribune*, Chicago.

Just Ready

Children of the Tenements

Illustrated, cloth, \$1.50

MR. RIIS'S ~~best~~ work in fiction. "No one whose city contains a tenement-house district can afford to miss reading what MR. RIIS has to say."—*The Sun*, N. Y.

The Battle with the Slum

Fully illustrated, gilt top, \$2.00 net

"The clearest presentation of the slum problem ever written."—*Baltimore Sun*.

"A sane story yet more dramatic than any work of fiction . . . a book that every one should read."

—*Literary Digest*.

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
Publishers

Mr. RIIS'S *new book*

JUST READY

Children of the Tenements

contains a series of stories which are far more than merely capital tales; they are unforgettable pictures of those quarters of New York which no one knows so well as Mr. RIIS. For over twenty years he has waged the relentless *Battle with the Slum*, which he has described so graphically in *The Making of an American*; and to him as to no other one man is due the betterment of such holes as the vanished Bone and Cat alleys.

Some of these are Christmas stories, and all of them have to do with the children for whom Mr. RIIS has spent the best of his life and strength—that they may have at least some opportunity to become “decent citizens.”

Cloth, 16mo, illustrated, \$1.50

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

Publishers

In compliance with Section 108 of the
Copyright Revision Act of 1976,
The Ohio State University Libraries
has produced this facsimile on permanent/durable
paper to replace the deteriorated original volume
owned by the Libraries. Facsimile created by
Acme Bookbinding, Charlestown, MA



2001

The paper used in this publication meets the
minimum requirements of the
American National Standard for Information
Sciences - Permanence for Printed Library
Materials,
ANSI Z39.48-1992.



